

Asian Development Bank to smash over Limbuwan heritage Sarangkokma



Heading in Sarangkokma

A warm 'sewaro' greeting in Limbuwan, residing in the Himalayas of Eastern Nepal. A long history of collective efforts, the Limbu people have established their own distinctive identity, their glory, it stagnated and started deteriorating after the Limbus got dethroned.

In the Eastern region of Nepal, a historical palace of Bijayapur, known as **Sarangkokma** in Limbu language, its remains are in endangered state due to the absence of necessary research. The remains of ancient Bijaypur Palace is located at a hilltop in the city of Dharan. Like many heritage sites that are culturally significant to indigenous people, the palace is also at threat of being dismantled in the name of development. A few scattered bricks are the only remnants of a glorious edifice that Bijaypur Durbar used to be.

Sarangkokma and once a major landmark during its time of glory, the palace has lost its appeal due to the government's negligence to the pathetic state it is in. With the last few bricks remaining on ground, Sarangkokma awaiting for excavation is being plastered for a Drinking Water Project.

History of Sarangkokma's Palace



Sarangkokma

Established during the period of Limbuwan, Bijaypur Palace in the Kingdom of Bijaypur was named after its king Bijay Narayan Raya. The native name of this

palace in Limbu language is Sarangkokma, where ‘Sarang’ means ‘Root’ and ‘Kokma’ means ‘Hill’.

The History of Limbuwan is characterized by the close interaction of Limbuwan with its neighbours; independent and semi-independent rule characterized by autonomy for most of its time.

According to the publication “Tumpahampe Genealogy” (2063 B.S., page 258), in the descendants of Ing dynasty of Limbuwan, the first descendant was called Sanglaing and the second descendant- Punglaing. The second descendant Punglaing adopted Hindu religion and was renamed as Amar Raya, while the citizens protested against such Hindu-ization. The generation continued to King Ap Narayan Raya, King Jarai Narayan Raya, King Indhing Narayan Raya and the 7th descendant of Ing dynasty in 16th century, – Bijay Narayan Raya, after whose name, the Kingdom of Bijaypur was established.

The last king of the Ing dynasty Bijay Narayan Raya maintained good friendship with the king of Phedap, Muray-Hang Khebang, and advised King Bijay Narayan to build a new town after his name, and thus Bijaypur town was settled. Bijaypur town, near present-day Dharan City remained the capital of entire Limbuwan until 1774. King Bijay Narayan then persuaded King Muray-Hang Khebang of Phedap to stay in Bijaypur and assist him in ruling Morang Kingdom as his prime minister. King Muray-Hang Khebang agreed to the proposal and his title of prime minister became a hereditary position for his descendants. In this way King Bijay Narayan Raya Sanglaing effectively made King Muray-Hang his prime minister and Muray-Hang’s son Bajahang Raya Khebang ruled the kingdom of Phedap under his father. King Bijay Narayan also gave the title of Raya, “King”, to Murray Hang, who became the first prime minister of Limbuwan and second king of Limbuwan to hold the Hindu title of “Raya”. The hilltop named as “Sarangkokma” was located to establish the Palace of the Kingdom.

Over time, the relationship between King Bijay Narayan Raya Sanlgaing and his prime minister Murray Hang Khebang disenchanted. The king accused Muray-Hang of raping his daughter and sentenced him to death. Due to this, Muray-Hang’s son waged a war against Bijay Narayan where he died in battle field. Bijay Narayan had a natural death.

This event led to the era of divided Limbuwan because the association of Limbuwan states no longer existed. During the divided period of Limbuwan King Buddhi Karna Raya Khebang of Morang (1769–73) came after the assassination of Kama Datta Sen.

Historical evidences



The central area of where palace used to exist. Now trees cut down to construct water tank. Flags been placed by activists who are resisiting

The palace of Buddhikarna Raya, the last king of the Limbuwan period, is reported to have been situated in Sarangkokma. Historical documentations mentions Maboo Hang, the king of Sanghuri Gadhi, sent Buddhi Karna as prime minister in Sarangkokma, where a place was build.

According to archaeologist Sankarman Rajvanshi (2017 BS)'s book titled Collection of Archaeology (Puratatto Sangraha) the black seals issued by Sen kings to Limbu, Yakkha and Rai people in 1779 B.S. mention the existence of the palace. Besides the historical documents of various wars of Limbuwan, the

contract papers of Limbuwan, genealogy, ancient scripts and the Gorkha-Limbuwan treaty papers mention its existence.

British Botanist Francis Hamilton who wrote ‘An account of Kingdom of Nepal’ (1819 AD), studied on Limbu and Rai genealogy. He met those individuals who witnessed or were victimized during the massacre of Gorkhali invasion in Limbuwan and after the Gorkha-Limbuwan Treaty. Buddhi Karna, PM in the Sarangkokma palace, fled away to Assam. The Gurkhas wrote letter to East India Company asking for help to find him out and send him back, In 1834 B.S. General Lord Warren Hastings and Sikkim’s king Namgyal received the letter and handed him over to Gurkhas. He was brought to Gidde Pahad and killed in a very abusive manner.

Baburam Acharya, a Nepali historian and literary scholar in his findings talked about the Limbuwan-Gorkha treaty where he mentioned about Lal Mohar : the document of Gorkhali and Sihamohar : the document of Limbus. Sociologist Dor Bahadur Bista also underlined the importance of Bijayapur area in his book ‘Fatalism and Development’ and ‘Sabai Jat Ka Phoolbari’ (Garden with all kinds of flowers). While anthropologist Siva Kumar Shrestha describes this in his book entitled ‘The historical study of Limbuwan’, Dr. Harka Gurung has also shown the importance of Bijayapur area, adding that Bijayapur should be entitled as a new district in the map of Nepal including Sunsari and Morang.

Visible remains of the site



The residue of metal after making weapons

The Palace has only few scattered bricks and the rest is a jungle. “During my childhood, I could see the dismantled walls of the palace, can see now nothing but trees and jungle”, says a middle aged man Phanindra Shrestha.

The government has marked the boundary of the palace area and a board has been placed at its entry point. However, due to lack of research conducted about the palace, a solid demarcation of the palace area is yet to be made. The place where now a Technical Campus is situated, used to be the home for elephants.



The entrance marking

“The window carvings in houses, the carvings in designs of flowers dates back to the era. These carved stones are scattered here and there. There are caves, jewelry, old coins as well as remains of water well. Objects like “Matyangra” (mud marbles) dating back to the period can be found as well.”, says Arjun Mabuhang, the mayor of Laliguras Municipality in Terhathum and an expert of Limbu Mundhum and history. More than half a dozen books related to history, culture and mythology are to his credit.



Scattered stones of the era



Historical coins found in Sarangkokma (Image provided by the activists)



A historical Matyangra (Image provided by the activists)

“A lot of archaeological stuff have been found while digging the fields of Budhimorang. We still need a lot of research to be done. In the central part of Sarangkokma, we can still find the excreted iron from weapons.”, Sargam Chemjong Limbu, a Limbu youth activist shows the places where army were trained and where their weapons were made.

The Project



Bulldozer over Sarangkokma (Image snapped from Sargam Chemjong's Facebook video).

Asian Development Bank's Integrated Urban Development Project along Dharan Sub-Metropolitan City has planned a Drinking Water Supply.

According to this project, nine reservoirs are to be placed in Dharan city, among which one reservoir was proposed to be placed in Sarangkokma. The project had cleared a patch of forest area in Sarangkokma about a year ago with the aim of constructing a water tank with a capacity of 600,000 litres. Work on the water tank, however, had come to a halt after Limbuwan organization of the municipality protested the chosen site lay in a historic area of great archaeological value. Few weeks back, the authorities started to bulldoze the major area, which was protested by the locals.

It seems that the project here is also exploiting the vulnerability of citizens. Drinking water problem is a big issue in Dharan, due to which the essence of project increases, but the selection of site for water reservoir was clearly a blunder. The reservoir could have been placed at any other site and it wasn't at all necessary to choose archaeologically important sites like Sarangkokma. "We are not saying that there shouldn't be water tanks in Dharan. We can build a water tank anywhere, but we cannot regain the lost history if we destroy our Sarangkokma.", says Aita Khajum, an expert of Kelaang (Chyabbrung Dance) and a researcher of Mundhum.

Department of Archaeology has studied this site and published a document called "Bijaypur Durbar Remains". Sarangkokma is listed among seven monuments of Sunsari and is also a national heritage site. Ironically the [Draft Initial Environmental Examination](#) of the project includes, "Cultural heritage: There are 17 temples, 1 Masjid and 3 churches in Dharan worshipped by the people, however, there are no cultural areas next to the sub-projects that will be affected." which is a completely wrong statement.

Intangible aspects

"The site does not have visible structures and only remains can be seen. It is awaiting to be excavated and its structures dugged out. One example could be Maya Civilization of America which was dugged out of the remains and after a lot of studies, the structures have been rebuilt.", Amit Yakthungba, an activist and editor said.



Chyabrung dance at Sarangkokma (Image snapped from Sargam Chemjong's Facebook).

Until 2023 B.S. the council of Chumlung for Save Kipat Land Campaign was held here. However, Land Reform Act 2023 was the last breath of Kipat Land Protection Campaign. Kipat land are cultural and revenue-free land owned by the Limbu clans. Each clan had their own Kipat land which was revenue free, autonomous and its production was used for community benefits and betterment. Clan was the ownership basis for Kipat Land. One of the important characteristics of the Kipat system is that neither the chief nor his people were allowed to sell their land to any outsiders or any non-clan members. Non-clan members were only allowed to rent the land for the period of time and were not supposed to take permanent land ownership. The land was to be divided equally among all sons and unmarried daughters. All the chiefs of villages must have a council, called Chumlung, of four members to assist him in ruling the villages.

A 'smarak' has been kept at the top of site with the flags of Khambuwan and Limbuwan, with a pillar of information about this site and Limbuwan. Few

years back, people started doing Chyabrung dance in this place to reclaim the native ownership of the area.



Smarak placed at Sarangkokma

The activists claim that a lot of undocumented Limbuwan heritages have been stagnated and lost. Along the Hilyang of Panther/Taplejung, Sarangkokma is the largest historical remains of Limbuwan period.

How the sites got stagnated



Gorkha-Limbuwan Treaty (Source: Veergorkha.com)

It was the Gorkha-Limbuwan Treaty in 1774 CE which is documented as Bikrama Samvat 1823 Shrawan 22, the long battles of Gorkha and Limbuwan came to an end with this treaty. Since Gorkhalis were not being able to defeat Limbuwan, they created misery and chaos in the city time and again, which made Limbuwan sign a treaty. According to this, Limbuwan would come under the flagship of Gorkha but will not submit their autonomy and let Gorkhalis interfere in their issues. The Gorkha Bhardars, Abhiman Singh Basnet, Parath Bhandari, Kirti Singh Khawas and Bali Bania on behalf of Gorkhali King Prithivi Narayan Shah, agreed to take an oath and swear on “Noon pani” (salt-water) promising that Gorkha raja would neither confiscate Limbus’ Kipat land nor destroy them. After making such agreement on salt-water considered as sacred, the Gorkhalis gave the following treaty paper, or Lal Mohar, to the Limbu ministers of Bijaypur.

Despite the treaty, Gorkhalis started violating Limbus. In 1867, The state government forced the people of Limbuwan to celebrate Dashain or else bear the consequences. Gorkha rulers soon suppressed the protest resulting in many deaths. In 1870, the Limbu language suppression policy of the Ranas led to another uprising in Limbuwan. Limbu script or education in the Limbu language was thought of as anti-nationalist, so the state adopted the policy of suppressing all native (ex-nations’) languages and cultures of Nepal. Many Limbus were either executed or chased away from their motherland. The Rana government’s autocratic rule stated that Kipat lands of Limbuwan could be turned into *raikar* lands if the Limbu owners could not pay off loans within six months. This was totally against the treaty of 1774, which specifically stated that the lands of Limbuwan to the east of Arun River could never be transferred to the Raikar system. Up to 1920 the Subha and their Chumlung also had power to hold courts according to tradition in their jurisdiction.

Army barrage and towers were systematically placed in those kind of sites after Limbuwan kings got displaced. There was carelessness and indifferent behaviour to indigenous artifacts by the state, until they can have a sound source of economy, but still the indigenous artifacts were not shown with native narratives (homogenous nationalism). Limbus of Ilam rose in resistance against the government policies of gradually nibbling away the rights given to them by the 1774 treaty. Thus in this way, the state tried to take over the autonomy and rights of Limbu people of Limbuwan. After its annexation to Gorkha, the Capital became Nepa Valley, and Limbuwan being far from the capital led to negligence of the region.

“The younger generation are indoctrinated through education. They were never taught the history of Limbuwan and the Limbu perspective, but always the Gorkhali glorification was instilled in their brains”, says Amit Yakthungba, an activist, freelancer and researcher.

During the period of Rana Bahadur Shah, 30 thousand documents were burnt in Chainpur(1860-70 roughly). While Limbu cultures have close relation with nature as compared to any religion, state Hindu-ization was prevalent. The state enforcement on Hinduism after annexation to Gorkha accelerated after Jung Bahadur Rana’s Muluki Ain declaring Nepal as a Hindu state. The non-Hindu Limbuwan cultures got systematically and severely repressed during state Hindu-ization. There is a prominent proverb “Lathalinge Raja ko Bhatabhunge Durbar” which means “ A devastated palace of a disordered king”. These Limbuwan heritages and history have never been explained in history books or mainstream through the narratives of Limbu people. It has always been explained through the Hindu lens, which is of course for Limbuwan an imposed religion and imposed narratives after various socio-political changes in the region. “The culture of Yakthung people is distinct from the Hindus, yet after Limbuwan got annexed to Gorkha, Hindu-ization started to replace our native narratives with Hindu ones.”, Sundar Khebang, a youth activist says.

“To list of few names, our Yasok has been turned as Siddhadevi, Myanglung has been named as Singhawahini, Mukumlung has been made Pathibhara while Yuma has been made Yumapathibhara. These are just few examples around Sarangkokma where native heritages have been redefined under Hindu lens.”, Amit adds.

There is settlement of squatters after 2021/23 B.S.

Traditional Limbu Administrative Units: This is an issue that most of the people don’t know and our history books never talk about. With structuralization of Nepal in 75 districts in 2018 B.S. by King Mahendra Shah, de-structurized the traditional administrative units of Limbu people. The units are called “Thum”. 17 thums have been identified yet. There is a saying called “10 Limbu, 17 Thum”.

The demands of activists and experts



A picture I took with the activists after having a chat about the issue.

The activists have demanded the water tank to be taken away from Sarangkokma and construct it somewhere else. They demanded the Dharan Sub-Metropolitan City Office to form a committee called Sarangkokma (Bijaypur Durbar Area) Protection and Management Committee. A demand was to start researching and determining the boundaries of Sarangkokma for long term protection and preservation of the palace. They also ask for excavation that can bring the nearest figure of the structures, and gives example from Maya Civilization where excavations from remains brought the figures to re-construct it again. Carbon dating and gene testing was also asserted. They have demanded to bring archaeologists, geologists, historians and cultural experts to be engaged and International as well as national rules to be followed while excavation. The physical remains, stone, carvings, and things scattered around needs to be collected, studied, documented and protected. Moreover, it was demanded to bring a Master Plan to revive, restore and preserve the artifacts of Sarangkokma, and advocate to be listed as World Heritage. Sarangkokma should be declared as a Tourist Site in Dharan. While determining the area of the palace and

excavating it, the Palace area, the Gadhi area, Hattisar area, Trench, Fort should also be taken into accounts. To make a large research, a museum of this should also be established.

“The activists have been pictured as anti-development riots in order to malign the movement, however the process of comprehensive development includes the preservation of heritage, stakeholdership of indigenous groups and local community building, while destroying an archaeologically important site cannot be development. Dharan can be supplied drinking water with water reservoirs at many other places and it does not have to be Sarangkokma. Dharan can be supplied with water, without destroying any of its heritages.”, say the activists and experts.



An interaction program organized by Kirat Yakthung Chumlung on the issue with presence of activists, representatives from various ethnic organizations and experts of history.



The protection of Limbuwan heritage is being advocated by various ethnic groups and organizations, which are Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, Rai organizations, Magar Sangh and Newa Dey Daboo. Phanindra Shrestha, identifies as '*Limbuwani-Newa*', as a descendant Newa who migrated from Nepal Mandala to Limbuwan on Trade treaty during the Medieval period, which emerged an integrated identity '*Limbuwani Newa*'.

Nogen

Resource persons

1. Arjun Mabuhang, Mayor of Laligurans Municipality in Terhathum
2. Amit Yakthungba, an editor and activist based in London
3. Sargam Chemjong Limbu, a Limbu activist
4. Sundar Khebang
5. Jaya Sambahamphe
6. Budrosh Khewa
7. Aita Khajum

Online sources:

1. [Historical Bijayapur Durbar awaits restoration](#), Himalayan Times.
2. The lost city on the brink of desolation, Amit Thebe, Nepali Samachar.
3. [Kirat History and Culture](#), Imansingh Chemjong, Google Books.

4. विजयपुर दरबार परिसरमा पानी ट्यांकी बनाउन लागेको भन्दै स्थानीय आन्दोलित.

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Me during the process of research.

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